

BAHRAIN

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From despotism to democracy; Sacrifices make the day

Has the era of democracy in Bahrain finally dawned? The recent developments have suddenly given rise to the feeling that the black era may have come to an end. In addition to other measures, the repeal of the emergency laws on 18 February has special significance. The two Amiri decree has come as a surprise even to those related to the authorities. Since the prime minister imposed the State Security Law in 1974, a large establishment flourished over the years. The ministry of interior has employed more recruits, than the ministry of defence. Both ministries are allocated almost a third of the country's budget, whereas other service ministries such as education, health and social affairs, are allocated much less. The decision to repeal the notorious laws is thus of a far important significance than other concessions. The State Security Court has sent thousands of innocent people to prison. It had allowed confessions drawn from defendants under duress to be presented as evidence, and disallowed the right to appeal its verdicts. International human rights organizations have, over the years, directed their criticisms to these emergency laws and demanded their repeal. The prime minister has established his iron-fist policy over the country aided by these draconian measures. The brave decision by the Amir to close that chapter has been welcomed by these organisations.

However, there are reservations about the security apparatus that is still intact. The mechanisms that have facilitated serious abuse of human rights remain in force. The Security & Intelligence Service (SIS) established by the British colonial officers headed by Ian Henderson in mid sixties is still feared by the people. Unless the machine of torture and terror are dismantled, confidence in the ongoing political process is likely to be shaken. People are now waiting for more courageous decisions by the Amir to change the image of the country from despotism to a form of democracy.

Despite some reservations expressed by the opposition and pro-democracy activists, the National Charter proposed by the Amir has been endorsed by 98.4% of people in the referendum that took place on 14-15 February. The BFM initially rejected the Charter because of its vagueness. When it issued its statement to this effect on 8 February, the authorities became alarmed and the Amir had to intervene himself in order to remove the people's suspicions. After meeting with four senior opposition figures on 8 February

(Sheikh Al-Jamri, Seyyed Abdulla Al-Ghoreifi, Mr. Abdul Wahab Hussain and Dr. Ali Al-Oreibi) the Amir instructed the Minister of Justice to issue a statement to clear the vagueness on the main issues raised. The local press published them on 9 February clarifying that the Constitution is above the Charter and that the appointed body will not have legislative powers in the bicameral system. The BFM, having achieved these pledges, modified its position on 10 February and called on people to express their views as they saw the situation.

The Amir also decided to release all political prisoners and allow the unconditional return of the exiles. By the time the people went to the ballot box, Bahrain's torture chambers and prisons became totally depleted of any political prisoners for the first time since the mid fifties. Political exiles have started their journey home after decades in the Diaspora. The mechanisms of the old regime, however, continue to pose a threat to the political reforms being undertaken by the Amir.

Bahrain has now taken the first steps on the road to a more open and democratic political system. There is an atmosphere of fresh air in the horizon, which enables people to express themselves with a degree of confidence that they would not be prosecuted by the henchmen of Ian Henderson and his clique. However, it is hoped that the reforms would restore basic justice and the rule of law. It is hoped that the perpetrators of crimes against humanity through torture and maltreatment of prisoners will eventually be brought to account for their crimes. This will help the people to overcome the trauma of decades of horror created by the ancient torture regime.

The future political process will become more meaningful if the rights of people are protected and the rule of law upheld. It is of special importance for Bahrain to ratify the two international covenants on political, civil, cultural, social and economic rights. A process of national reconciliation is needed in order to pave the way for future elections and political pluralism. It is also hoped that the government will not wait long before deciding on engage the political process on the lines prescribed by the Constitution. The confidence building measures needed to establish the country on firm grounds necessitate that any changes to the Constitution be effected within article 104 of the Consti-

tion which confines any changes to the agreement of two thirds of the elected members of the National Assembly. Any changes outside the Constitution are likely to lead to unnecessary political crisis. Further openness especially with regards to general freedoms will lead to stronger confidence in the Amir's programme of reforms.

The Bahraini opposition feels optimistic about the future. Most of the demands presented over the past quarter of a century have now been fulfilled, although some of them await being put in practice. It also feels indebted to the international support offered by international human rights organisations and personalities. The sacrifices of the people of Bahrain over the years have been enormous, and the moderate nature of the demands, together with the openness of the opposition and its coherent policies and unified stands, have been the crucial factors in defeating the mentality of the old guards in the country. Over the past few weeks, the language of the opposition has been put in use by Bahraini journalists and media. Many are now talking of the black era and calling for its perpetrators to be brought to justice. This is a healthy sign in a country that has experienced hard times. The opposition has welcomed these positive developments and called for mature relationships among the various forces operating in the country.

The various political and religious groups have expressed their keenness on maintaining a unified position with regards to the political change and taking active part in ensuring a swift return to normality. They strive to create civil society institutions and lead the societal changes towards development and prosperity. The new generation of youth, especially those who have been released from prisons or allowed back from exile need to be assessed in taking a more positive role in the process.

So far, the Amiri decrees have been the main elements of change, but establishment of the rule of law must become a reality. The people like to become citizens who have constitutional rights and obligations and are not ruled by personal goodwill gestures. It is a long process, but is necessary if the future of Bahrain is to be safeguarded. The long march of the Bahraini people started decades ago, now is the time for a march of different nature; the establishment of the rule of law in a democratic and pluralistic system.

Bahrain opposition leader urges reforms support

By Abbas Salman

ARAD, Bahrain, March 1 (Reuters) - A Bahraini opposition leader, back home from a 33-year exile, urged exiled groups on Thursday to support landmark reforms launched by the Gulf Arab state's emir. Bahrainis voted overwhelmingly in a referendum last month to support a charter proposed by Emir Sheikh Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa calling for a partly elected parliament, a constitutional monarchy and an independent judiciary.

Abdul-Rahman al-Naimi, 57, returned home on Wednesday from exile in Syria and Lebanon following a general amnesty issued by the emir.

"The moves taken by the emir have helped the exiled opposition to support him. We back the emir because his steps have opened a wide door for dialogue between him, his crown prince and the political forces. "We support the emir's measures...and consider them a way of restoring parliamentary life in the country," Naimi, a Sunni Muslim, told Reuters in an interview.

Sheikh Hamad, who took power in 1999 following the death of his father, abolished emergency laws last month after pardoning 900 prisoners and exiles.

Officials have said the planned parliament, expected to be established in 2004, would enjoy legislative powers.

"The emir has tried to end an era of crises and political turmoil between the government and political forces," said Naimi, a former secretary-general of the outlawed Bahrain Popular Liberation Front.

Bahrain dissolved its first elected parliament in 1975, only two years after it was set up. The move led to unrest among Bahrain's majority Shi'ite community demanding political and economic reforms by the Sunni-led government.

The island state now has an appointed Shura council which advises the government on draft laws before they are sent to the emir for final approval.

EXILES' RETURN A MAIN OPPOSITION DEMAND

"After the emir's amnesty decision, the road is open for the return of all Bahrainis in exile, which had been a main demand of the opposition," Naimi said.

Some of the exiles were de-

ported by the government at the height of the 1994-1998 unrest.

"All political groups in the country should support the emir's measures because we don't want (emergency) laws to be reactivated or any Bahraini remaining in exile," said Naimi,

He stopped short of calling for a ban on political parties to be withdrawn, saying "political societies" should be allowed. Another opposition leader, Abdel-Nabi al-Ekri, a Shi'ite, returned home from Syria on Wednesday after 15 years in exile. Naimi praised a government move to grant full citizenship to people born and raised in Bahrain. "I hope there will be no stateless people in Bahrain in future."

Bahrain has so far granted full citizenship to 169 people. Officials have said around 15,000 people, comprising 700 stateless people and 8,000 from Arab and other countries, had applied for Bahraini citizenship.

"Every Bahraini in exile has the right to get a Bahraini passport instead of providing him with an entry paper as is done now," Naimi said, adding that he and his



Leaders pledge their support for reforms and call for greater openness

The Heir Apparent, Sheikh Salman bin Hamad Al-Khalifa met with a delegation of senior opposition figures on 3 March. The delegation comprised, amongst others, Sheikh Abdul Amir Al-Jamri, Mr. Abdul Wahab Hussain and Mr. Hassan Mushaimaa. During the meeting several issues of national concern were raised and the crown prince vowed to continue the new path for reforms. The opposition delegation welcomed the approach of the crown prince regarding accountability, equality of all citizens and the rule of law. One of the issues discussed was the fate of about a hundred families who had been stripped of their Bahraini citizenship and inhumanly deported to Iran in 1980. The crown prince promised to restore the rights of the citizenship of these family who have suffered for the past 20 years.

The labour minister announced on 4 March that he implemented the directives for re-opening the Islamic Enlightenment Society that was closed down in 1984. This was one of the promises given by the Amir to the opposition figures who met with him on 8 February. Moreover, the labour minister confirmed the registration of a non-governmental organization for human rights. Dr. Sabeeka Al-Najjar will be heading the Bahrain Human Rights Society. The latter is one of the key demands of the opposition and its formation would help to consolidate a new phase in

Bahrain. The labour minister said there were now 222 societies in Bahrain, 16 of which have been registered in the past year and 10 within the last two months.

The Amir Sheikh Hamad Bin Isa Al-Khalifa met visiting Qatari Amir Sheikh Hamad Bin Khalifa Al-Thani on 2 March, ahead of the ruling to be issued by the International Court of Justice in The Hague on the territorial. Last June, the Court completed a five-week public hearing into the dispute that almost led to war in 1986.

Following the visit, Qatar released four Bahrainis who had been detained for about a month. Abdul Aziz Mobarak Bu-Qais, Yahya Mohamed Al-Ansari, Ali Mohammed Al-Jamea and Khalil Abdul Rasool Bu-Cheeri were detained after camping in Qatar. Following their arrest, they were told that the area was a restricted one and were then detained for about a month. Two Bahraini opposition figures who re-

turned on 28 February joined a gathering at Al-Oroba Club on 3 March. Mr. Abdul Rahman A-Nuaimi, 57, and Mr. Abdul Nabi Al-Ekri, 50, returned home after three decades in exile. They had been well received by the people of Bahrain who thanked them for their continuous struggle. The meeting at Al-Oroba Club on 3 March was addressed by the pro-democracy personality, Dr. Monira Fakhro. Dr. Fakhro assessed the future role to be played by the Bahraini civil society institutions. In her intervention, she said that the "link between democracy and civil society is crucial". Civil society institutions are free, vulnerable, and pluralistic ones that foster societal cohesion and strengthen the political system. She welcomed the recent steps and called for the amendment or abolishing of the law governing the formation and functioning of associations. She also called for the formation of unions to group the various interests in democratically elected set-ups. She also called for the reforming of the University of Bahrain and openness in dealing with critical issues, such as the preparations for the municipality elections. She also called for lifting the ban on political parties, without which the reforms would be incomplete.

Bahrain Freedom Movement

4 March 2001



Sheikh Isa Qassim returns to Bahrain

By ADNAN MALIK, 8 March 2001
MANAMA, Bahrain (AP) -- A leading Shiite Muslim cleric associated with the opposition returned to a hero's welcome in Bahrain on Thursday after years of self-imposed exile.

"Welcome! Welcome! Sheikh Qassim," hundreds of Bahraini Shiites chanted at the airport after Sheikh Isa Qassim alighted from a plane that had flown him from Iran.

Looking weary, Qassim, who is believed to be in his 60s, was whisked through the airport, where security was especially tight, and taken to a waiting minibus.

Members of the crowd clapped and shouted "Victory for Islam" as Qassim boarded the minibus to be driven to his home in Diraz, a village south-west of the capital Manama.

Scores of honking vehicles, moving bumper to bumper, followed the sheik's vehicle as it slowly made its way along the 10-kilometer (6-mile) route. The cars carried pictures of Qassim and Bahrain's emir Sheikh Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa.

Qassim did not speak to the media, but his son-in-law, Ali Jassem, said the sheik believed he had returned at an important time for Bahrain because of the constitutional reforms under way.

"He is very calm and wants to shoulder the responsibility of developing

the country by peaceful means," said Ali Jassem, Qassim's son-in-law.

Last month, Bahrainis voted by an overwhelming majority for a national charter that provides for an elected parliament and equal rights for all citizens. Ten days earlier, the emir pardoned 108 exiles and 289 other people who had been accused, detained or convicted on security charges. Bahrain experienced a violent campaign for political reform during the mid-1990s, led by Shiites who demanded the restoration of the parliament that was dissolved in 1975. Shiites, who form the majority of



the population, felt they did not enjoy economic and social parity with the Sunni Muslims, to which the ruling family belongs. More than 40 people died in the unrest and hundreds were imprisoned.

Qassim had been an active member of the dissolved parliament and is a close associate of Bahrain's most prominent internal dissident, Sheikh Abdul Ameer al-Jamri. Al-Jamri spent 3 1/2 years in detention on charges of espionage and inciting unrest. He was pardoned in July 1999, a day after he was convicted of the offenses and sentenced to 10 years in jail and a massive fine.

Qassim left Bahrain to study theology in the Iranian holy city of Qom before the unrest began in December 1994. He is believed to have remained abroad for fear of being detained on his return.

Diraz, where Qassim used to lead daily prayers at the island's largest Shiite mosque, was a hotbed of anti-government activity during the unrest. And Qom, where Qassim lived in Iran, hosted many Bahraini dissidents.

In an interview with Bahrain's Gulf Daily News, published Thursday, Qassim welcomed the reforms of the Western-educated emir, who succeeded his father in 1999.

"These bold political steps taken by the emir will certainly yield enormously positive results in a new environment where everyone will contribute to the march toward progress," he said.

Kuwait release Bahraini

KUWAIT, March 13 (Reuters) - Kuwait's emir has ordered the release of a Bahraini .. opposition activist held in the Gulf Arab state for more than 18 months, the Interior Ministry said on Tuesday. The ministry said in a statement carried by the official KUNA news agency that the emir, Sheikh Jaber al-Ahmad al-Sabah, had pardoned Bahraini national Adel Jassem al-Haiky and ordered his release. Bahraini opposition activists say Haiky was serving a three-year sentence in Kuwait on charges of taking part in anti-Bahraini government activities.

Bahrain's prime minister, Sheikh Khalifa bin Sulman al-Khalifa, pledged in February during talks with Bahraini opposition members to personally intervene to free Haiky.

The Emir of Bahrain, Sheikh Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa, has pardoned more than 900 political prisoners and exiles as part of landmark political reforms launched since he took power after the death of his father in 1999

National unity, promotion of democracy are top priorities

The first seminar to be held by the newly formed Bahraini Society for Human Rights (BSHR) was held on 27 March, with Salman Kamal-u-Din presenting an outline of the programme and intentions of the society. The chairman of the seminar also presented Dr. Saeed Shehabi who returned to Bahrain a week ago after 22 years in exile. On his part, Dr. Shehabi commented on the role played by opposition forces and gave an example about a person like Mr. Abdul Rahman Al-Nuaimi, who was also in the audience. Dr. Shehabi said that the documents released by the British Foreign Office about 1968 mentions the name of Mr. Al-Nuaimi and documents of 1960s also mention the name of Mr. Ahmed Al-Thawadi. The opposition activities of these people continued for decades and it is because of the diversity and persistence of the opposition forces that Bahrain witnesses a positive outcome.

Members of the Islamic Enlightenment Society (IES) met on 27 March to elect a new board for the restart of the society. The IES was closed down by the authorities in February 1984 and its reopening was a fulfilment of one of the promises made by the Amir in front of opposition figures. The IES was burnt down last year and its buildings are in ruin. The re-launch of the IES was welcomed by the opposition who has been demanding the right to form associations

without intervention from the state.

The president of Islah Society, Sheikh Isa bin Mohammed Al-Khalifa said that he "fully supports a proposal by Sheikh Al-Jamri to form a joint Shia-Sunni committee aimed at forging unity among the people of Bahrain". He said, "everybody is preparing for the new democratic era in Bahrain". Islah has made a start towards achieving national unity by inviting last Saturday Sheikh Al-Jamri for a public meeting. The meeting, held in Muharraq, attracted more than 700 people from all walks of life, and was in line with efforts to bring people together and forge greater national unity. Both the Muharraq-based Islah and the Duraz-based IES are expected to play a key role in fostering national unity amongst the two major Islamic sects, the Sunnis and Shias.

Mr. Abdul Rahman Al-Nuaimi delivered a lecture on 28 March on "NGOs and Public Freedoms". The meeting at a leading women association in Bahrain highlighted the history of clubs' and associations' formation in Bahrain and how the government's counter actions have led to the downsizing and marginalisation of the NGOs. He called for a positive embrace of the recent reforms to revive the role of NGOs, which can act as a shield for protecting democracy.

Bahrain Freedom Movement
30 March 2001

Lord Avebury to visit Bahrain; Dr. Shehabi returns home after 22

After more than six years of procrastination and refusal, the Bahraini government has at last agreed to allow Lord Avebury, the Vice-Chair of the UK Parliamentary Human Rights Group, to visit the country. Lord Avebury was promised a visit in November 1994, but this was delayed until January 1995. Just before he was to leave for Bahrain, the government withdrew its invitation. Lord Avebury has consistently raised the issue of Bahrain in the House of Lords and quizzed officials in the UK and Bahrain about the then continuing violations of human rights. Lord Avebury also commissioned a report on Bahrain and published his letters with the UK Foreign Office describing the interaction with the officials on Bahrain as a "Brick Wall". After the release of political prisoners and detainees and the ending of the State Security Law, Lord Avebury received several invitations from Bahrainis to visit the country, to witness at first hand the latest developments and to help make sure that the episode of repression is not to be repeated gain. The Bahraini opposition welcomes the government's decision to allow Lord Avebury to visit the country and hopes that the government would also allow other

international human rights observers to assess the situation.

The UN Human Rights Commission started its annual meeting in Geneva and this year would be the first one in more than a decade when the Bahraini government expects less criticism from the international community. The Bahraini human rights activists are re-directing their efforts for ensuring that the torturers may not resume their atrocities against the nation.

Several citizens complain that the authorities have started to intimidate them as they in-



tend return home. For example, Mohamed Al-Alawi, 21 years old, is still in Syria and has not been allowed to return home. His father flew to Syria so that he can accompany him during his trip back home, but the authorities refused to allow the young man to be reunited with his family. Mr. Al-Alawi had been detained in the past and is suffering from an illness that requires continuous attention by his family. Other citizens were stopped at the airport upon their return and were asked to report to police stations for interrogation. Several of these acts may be attributed to the old guards who are refusing to comply with the reforms.

Several key opposition figures have returned to Bahrain, including Sheikh Ali Salman, whose arrest in December 1994 sparked off the mass demonstrations. Dr. Saeed Shehabi of the Bahrain Freedom Movement is expected to return home on 23 March after 22 year in exile. The BFM hopes that the Bahraini authorities would abide by the pledges made by the Amir and would not return to oppressing the opposition and the people.

BFM, 23 March 2001

Pro-democracy figures and groups present their views to the nation

An important gathering with far reaching positive implications took place on Saturday 24 March at Islah Society in Muharraq, Bahrain. The gathering was addressed by Sheikh Al-Jamri, Sheikh Isa bin Mohammed Al-Khalifa (of Islah Society), Dr. Abdul Latif Al-Mahmood, Mr. Abdul Wahab Hussain and Mr. Abdul Rahman Al-Nuaimi. Islah Society is a leading Islamic organisation in Bahrain with several decades of activities and roots connected to the Muslim Brotherhood that was founded by Imam Hasan Al-Banna in Egypt. Sheikh Al-Jamri said in his speech that his visit to Islah Society marks the beginning of a new era that will witness a more united and robust approach to national political action. The leaders of Islah Society welcomed Sheikh Al-Jamri and other guests heralding a new phase in national harmony and consensus. Sheikh Al-Jamri proposed the formation of a committee to resolve all issues relating to the two main Islamic sects in Bahrain, the Sunni and Shia. Islah Society welcomed the proposal and vowed to deploy their vast resources for the common good of Bahrain.

Dr. Saeed Shehabi, Sheikh Ali Salman and Mr. Abdul Wahab Hussain met with the Amir, Sheikh Hamad bin Isa Al-Khalifa on 24 March. In the meeting the Amir reaffirmed that the future of Bahrain needs all the resources of Bahrainis. Dr. Shehabi, one of the BFM leaders who returned to Bahrain on 23 March after 22 years of exile, said that the meeting was a positive one indicating the seriousness of the Amir in going ahead with political reforms.

Two draft manifestos have been circulated to the public by two political groupings inside

Bahrain with the aim of preparing for the forthcoming parliamentary election. The first draft was issued about two weeks ago to represent the nationalist tendency, under the name of the "National Democratic Grouping". The second draft manifesto was issued on 25 March by the moderate "Al-Wasat Islamist Tendency". The Islamist manifesto (which is under development) stated the intents of the moderate tendency by referring to ten principles that would govern its approach. The ten principles were summarised as follows:

1. The Islamic civilisational culture is the framework for national programme, strategy and actions.

2. The pluralistic nature of Bahraini society in terms of ethnicity and religious sects is one of the important pillars. The political action programme will be based on principles that do not differentiate amongst citizens on the basis of creed, colour, race or tribal origin.

3. The 1973 Constitution is the basis for all laws and the elected council shall be the cornerstone for the legislative process.

4. The National Action Charter that received the consent of the majority of the population on 14 and 15 February 2001 refers to the Constitution. It is our belief that the actualisation of the Charter must be processed through the mechanism prescribed by the Constitution

5. The individual rights are indivisible, interdependent and inalienable. These include personal freedom that respects the general Islamic environment of society, freedom of ownership, freedom to reside in any location inside the country, freedom of work, free-

dom of travel and movement, freedom of expression, freedom of association, freedom of press, freedom of education and freedom of belief. These individual rights also include equality before the law and before the judiciary, equality in assuming public positions and equality in political rights.

6. The rights of groups in solidarity must be guaranteed and the government's actions must be limited in order to protect the cultural, social and economic rights of groups.

7. To guarantee the individual and group rights, the government will be urged to apply or ratify the two international covenants on civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, as well as the convention for the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women, the convention against torture (which Bahrain ratified in 1998), the convention for the right of the child (which Bahrain ratified in 1992) and the convention for the elimination of all forms of racism (which Bahrain ratified in 1990).

8. The establishment of a true civil society is the way forwards to guard against the despotism of the State.

9. Protecting the environment is duty prescribed by Islamic religion.

10. Bureaucracy and routine must be minimised to activate the legislated programmes for social and economic development. Transparency and accountability must be activated to eliminate or avoid corruption.

Bahrain Freedom Movement

26 March 2001